

THE OBSCENE MOVING IMAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE OHIO BOARD
OF FILM CENSORSHIP, 1913-1955

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BY

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This project is currently available at:

historyweb.digitalhistory.bsu.edu/jbilbrey/filmcensorshipohio/

The Obscene Moving Image: An Analysis of Film Censorship, 1913-1955 is the culmination of over a year and a half of research. The project uses digital text analysis tools to study film censorship in the state of Ohio from 1913-1955. By highlighting the experience of this one state and tracing the evolution of the content censored, this research is a case study within the scholarship of the history of film, and the broader cultural history of the U.S. in the twentieth century. The study expands on our understanding what motivated the censors and what content they focused upon, realizing that in addition to crime (the most commonly cited content in secondary scholarship about censorship), there was a significant censorship of sexual content.

Prior to my first semester in graduate school in Fall 2017, I was unaware that film was considered a valid primary source until I completed a historiography of “the myth of the west” that included several popular culture representations of that myth. Once aware, I eagerly searched for viable archive collections that related to the topic of film that I hoped to utilize for my thesis research. It was then, in January 2018, that I discovered the topic of film censorship, something that I had never heard discussed in my history classes before. As I dove into the secondary research, I discovered that while Indiana did not have a state film censorship board, Ohio did and the state archive in the Columbus had an entire collection of documents.

In February 2018 I made my first (of eventually four) trips to the Ohio History Connection archive in Columbus, Ohio. As I took photos of documents in the archive for later analysis, I realized that there was a wealth of relatively unexplored content. While research had been done on the film censorship legal battles and its effect on the development of the film

industry overall, there were only a few major published case studies of film censorship boards – and none were focused on Ohio.

In the semester of Spring 2018 I took two trips to the archive to gather research for an initial study of the Board's censorship. I organized these photos using Tropy, a free, open-source software research photo management tool (<https://tropy.org/>), creating my personal archive complete with tags and sections. During this semester I completed a close reading of the Board's censorship of bulletins (documents created by the Board which collected their requested eliminations from films submitted to be shown in the state) from September 1915 to February 1916. This research helped to create a starting point for larger analysis and can be seen in the final project.

After I wrote this initial paper I realized that a thesis was not the right option for this research, but rather a creative project using digital tools and a digital format for presentation would be necessary. What I came to realize was that not only was it necessary, but it helped shape the entire course of the project. I changed my courses and graduation timeline and enrolled in the digital track in the history program.

In Spring 2019, I decided to work with the same corpus that I had used in the previous study, but this time doing a distant reading through text analysis software. In order to do this, I ran the pictures of the archival documents through optical character recognition (OCR) in the Abbyy FineReader program (<https://www.abbyy.com/en-us/finereader/>), which turns images and pdfs into text files. For this corpus (September 1915 to February 1916 bulletins) I was able to correct the OCR process as it occurred, meaning I had “clean” files – ones that were free from errors. I then uploaded this corpus into Voyant, a free, open-source web-based text reading and analysis environment (<https://voyant-tools.org/docs/#!/guide/about>). These tools do not short cut

the research process nor do they provide analysis, rather they allow the researcher to organize and analyze a large amount of data. For example, the Voyant Trends tool allows the researcher to trace the frequency of multiple terms across the entire corpus in a chart, allowing the researcher to see change and compare terms. This sort of research would be significantly more time intensive without the use of text analysis software. After becoming acquainted with the use of digital tools, I set out to build a website to be the interactive platform for my research. I selected an HTML and CSS template from Templated (<https://templated.co/>), which provided a foundation of code that I could change as needed (using the program NoteTab Light to view and edit the code, <https://www.notetab.com/>). After I had coded and built the website, I uploaded it to Ball State's host servers using the file transfer program (FTP) FileZilla, (<https://filezilla-project.org/>).

Following the successful first use of digital tools and build of a digital presentation format, I continued to develop this project in Summer 2019 and Fall 2019. I took the findings of my close and distant reading of the small corpus of September 1915 to February 1916 and used the results as a framework for my analysis of a larger corpus of bulletins. I carefully selected several dates along the range of 1913-1955 based on availability of the archives and historical significance, resulting in: 1924, 1925, 1929, 1933, 1934, 1940, 1944, 1947, 1952, 1953, and 1954. I visited the archive two more times and for each of these dates I took pictures of the entire year of bulletins (which are weekly documents) and ran them through the Abbyy FineReader program to OCR them. However, unlike the initial research in the small corpus of bulletins, there was not enough time to make this a clean reading. I made the decision to have a larger corpus that had some machine transcription errors rather than a smaller corpus that was entirely clean. While having errors is not ideal, it did not significantly disrupt the study since I was aiming for

broad conclusions that showed the major topics and their change over time. If I was doing a close analysis of only one topic, such as the censorship of sacrilegious content, then having clean transcriptions of the documents would have been imperative.

The second part of the analysis focuses upon several case study films. The case study films were determined by availability of the film and content censored by the Board. The 1915 film, *Shanghaied*, is examined because there were a significant number of eliminations requested of the film and a restored version was available at The Internet Archive (archive.org). *The Outlaw* and *M* were chosen because the Ohio Board's had significant records regarding the film, there were several eliminations/reasons for the Board's decision, and both were publicly available. These films were also considered because each one of them covers a different major topic of the Board's censorship: violence in the case *Shanghaied*, sex in the case of *The Outlaw*, and crime represented by *M*.

A project based on moving images necessitates the use of a digital platform and methodology. Without the use of digital tools, it would not have been feasible to analyze the large corpus, nor would the presentation of that research have been as effective without the use of embedded tools. Further, the case studies are best presented next to the embedded film where the films can be watched while reading the reports from the censors and following along with the analysis. Digital scholarship is an exciting era for the field where the research process becomes interactive, allowing those visiting the platform to follow along the researcher as they build their argument, and test the researcher's conclusions in real time. Rather than just presenting a static summary of findings, this project is a dynamic resource that presents the audience with the sources, process, and conclusions all at once. Those visiting the website can follow along with my argument while simultaneously examining the evidence, since the embedded text analysis

tools allow for real test testing of my conclusions. If this research would have been presented in the form of a traditional print thesis then the reader would not be able to search the text analysis tools nor watch the films while following along with the argument. This is imperative for the case study section of the project, where the ability to watch the film embedded on the web page allows the reader to see the film and read the Board's requested eliminations/reasons for rejection in real time - giving the audience a chance to watch a film from the Board's perspective. This does more than just support the analysis of the bulletins; it provides a necessary perspective on the process of censorship and the Board's requested cuts in the context of an entire film. The reader being able to see the films and censorship from the Board's perspective is essential to a true understanding of the motivations and concerns of the Ohio Board of Film Censorship.